

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5767

INFO AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

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AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE

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S E C R E T PARIS 00821

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, UR, FR

SUBJECT: QUAI DISCOUNTS SPECULATION ABOUT BREZHNEV'S
HEALTH

1. BEGIN SUMMARY: IN CONVERSATION WITH EMBOFF JANUARY
10, QUAI DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR EASTERN EUROPE OMNES
DISCOUNTED CURRENT PRESS SPECULATION ABOUT BREZHNEV'S
HEALTH AND POSSIBLE IMMINENCY OF A LEADERSHIP CRISIS IN
THE USSR. END SUMMARY.

2. IN QUAI'S VIEW THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT BREZHNEV HAS
INCREASINGLY SUFFERED FROM FATIGUE. BREZHNEV HIMSELF
HAS MADE NO SECRET OF THIS, FOR INSTANCE, DURING
RAMBOUILLET MEETINGS WITH GISCARD. THESE SYMPTOMS' NOT
ABNORMAL IN A MAN OF BREZHNEV'S AGE AND LIFE-STYLE,
UNDOUBTEDLY REFLECT SOME SIGNIFICANT UNDERLYING
PROGRESSIVE AILMENTS, WHICH THE STRESS OF HIS RECENT
TRAVEL MAY HAVE AGGRAVATED, FORCING BREZHNEV TO RETREAT
TEMPORARILY FROM THE PUBLIC VIEW. HOWEVER, FOR THE
PRESENT AT LEAST, QUAI HAS NO EVIDENCE OF CRISIS IN

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BREZHNEV'S HEALTH, CERTAINLY NOT OF A NATURE WHICH WOULD

JUSTIFY IMMINENT CHANGE IN KREMLIN'S LEADERSHIP. IN THIS CONNECTION OMNES REITERATED QUAI'S PREVIOUSLY EXPRESSED VIEW THAT CANCELLATION OF BREZHNEV'S MIDDLE EAST TRIP WAS ESSENTIALLY A POLITICAL GESTURE, REFLECTING SADAT'S FAILURE TO MEET KREMLIN'S PRESUMED QUID PRO QUO'S FOR RE-ARMING EGYPTIAN FORCES.

3. OMNES, THEREFORE, THOUGHT MUCH OF CURRENT PRESS SPECULATION ABOUT POSSIBLE SUCCESSION IN THE KREMLIN PREMATURE. ON THE CONTRARY, QUAI HAS NOTED SEVERAL RECENT INDICATIONS SUGGESTING THAT BREZHNEV'S LEADERSHIP POSITION REMAINS FIRM AND UNCHANGED. THUS, DURING BREZHNEV'S CURRENT ABSENCE FROM PUBLIC VIEW, QUAI GATHERS THAT REFERENCES TO HIM IN THE SOVIET MEDIA HAVE CONTINUED TO BE POSITIVE AND AT SLIGHTLY HIGHER LEVEL THAN IS NORMALLY THE CASE. THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE'S MESSAGE OF CONDOLENCES ON THE OCCASION OF HIS MOTHER'S DEATH WAS CLEARLY CORDIAL. AND THE QUAI HAS BEEN STRUCK BY TASS'S VIGOROUS PUBLIC REJECTION ON JANUARY 8 OF A LE MONDE ANALYSIS QUESTIONING BREZHNEV'S FUTURE. BARRING SUDDEN DETERIORATION OF BREZHNEV'S HEALTH, WHICH OMNES WAS CAREFUL NOT TO PRECLUDE, HE THOUGHT ON BALANCE THAT BREZHNEV WOULD RE-EMERGE FROM HIS CURRENT RETREAT WITH HIS FULL POLITICAL POWERS UNIMPAIRED.

4. OMNES THOUGHT THAT BREZHNEV WAS UNDOUBTEDLY AWARE OF THE SLOW PROGRESSIVE DECLINE OF HIS HEALTH AND, IN OMNES' VIEW, MIGHT THEREFORE WELL BE PLANNING HIS OWN RETIREMENT SOMETIME IN THE COMING MONTHS OR YEARS. BEFORE DOING SO, HOWEVER, OMNES THOUGHT THAT BREZHNEV WOULD UNDOUBTEDLY WANT TO CROWN HIS FOREIGN POLICY SUCCESSES WITH A CSCE SUMMIT (AND WOULD THEREFORE PRESUMABLY MAKE THE NECESSARY CONCESSIONS TO ACHIEVE THIS). AND BREZHNEV WOULD ALSO WANT TO AWAIT THE OCCASION OF THE 25TH PARTY CONGRESS LATER THIS YEAR. THIS WOULD OFFER HIM AN OCCASION TO RENDER A FULL ACCOUNTING OF HIS STEWARDSHIP, AND, PERHAPS MORE IMPORTANTLY, TO BECOME THE FIRST SOVIET LEADER TO RETIRE IN AN HONORED AND PEACEFUL SUCCESSION. IF THIS HYPOTHESIS SHOULD PROVE CORRECT, OMNES SPECULATED THAT

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INDICATIONS OF POSSIBLE KREMLIN SHIFTS MIGHT BEGIN TO BECOME APPARENT SOME MONTHS BEFORE THE ACTUAL EVENT.
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